

Art Research News

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Prendergast Forgery Exposed

There is a great deal of frustration in the international art community over the proliferation of forgeries in the market today. While many are amateurish, some are executed with such a high degree of skill and sophistication that all but the most experienced connoisseur would mistake them for originals. What compounds the problem is that there are no legal means to stop the flow of these forgeries, which are often left to circulate from one collector to the next over many years. Beginning with this issue, IFAR will be including articles on some interesting works that, under close examination by scholars, are judged to be forgeries. We feel this will be an important service to the community and will alert readers to this problem.

One of our most fascinating recent examinations has focused on a watercolor of a Beach Scene, signed "Maurice B. Prendergast" at lower left. IFAR conferred with three experts on this work and comparisons were made with several authentic works by the artist. The watercolor was found to relate closely in composition or in specific motifs to three works by Prendergast:

1. an unfinished and little-known watercolor on the reverse of *Early Beach*, ca 1900, sold on December 4, 1980 at Sotheby Parke Bernet in New York;
2. *Revere Beach*, 1896, from the collection of paintings in the White House; and
3. *April Snow, Salem*, 1906-7, in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The compositional format of the beach scene examined by IFAR appears to derive directly from an unfinished sketch on the reverse side of *Early Beach*. The arrangement of figures on the beach in the middle ground, and the treatment of the water and sky beyond, closely parallel the composition of the unfinished work. In addition, several specific details, such as the float offshore, the vertical reflection of sunlight on the water, the young girl

Beach Scene, attributed to Maurice B. Prendergast, signed I/I. IFAR's examination has revealed that this work is a fake based on three original watercolors by Prendergast.



Revere Beach, 1896, by Maurice Prendergast, White House Collection. The figure of the man in a dark suit seen in profile, and the two ladies with parasols at left are motifs used by the forger in *Beach Scene*.



Unfinished watercolor on reverse of *Early Beach*, ca 1900, by Maurice Prendergast. The compositional format of the forgery is based on this little known, unfinished watercolor.



April Snow, Salem, 1906-7, by Maurice B. Prendergast, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The figures of the two dogs at lower right were transposed by the forger to a similar location in *Beach Scene*.



seen from behind, and the two girls sitting on a rocky outcropping at right are nearly identical.

In the left and center foreground portions of the work which are left unfinished in *Early Beach*, one finds motifs from another well-known work by Prendergast, *Revere Beach*. The figure of a man in a dark suit and hat, the two women with parasols, and the rocky beach and water areas that surround them appear to be transcribed directly from this source.

Finally, the arrangement and specific characteristics of the two small dogs in the lower right corner find their source in another well known watercolor by Prendergast, *April Snow, Salem*.

The question to be resolved is, therefore, whether the watercolor was executed by Prendergast, using motifs common to his work, or by a follower as a pastiche approximating his style. The experts consulted by IFAR were in agreement that the work examined displays many weaknesses of style and rendering that preclude an attribution to Prendergast. The figures lack the authority and vitality of an original work. In places, the scale of the figures is distorted, creating strange relationships such as that between the man seen in profile and the women at his right. This handling reveals a tentativeness and lack of skill.

The two dogs in *April Snow, Salem* are frisky and alert; in transport, they have lost all substance and character. The rocks in the pool stand out too prominently, and appear to float on the surface of the water rather than becoming integrated

into their surroundings as they are in *Revere Beach*.

In addition, the watercolor shows no sign of preliminary sketchwork, a feature common to most watercolors by Prendergast. Generally, Prendergast drew the basic elements of the composition on paper before using watercolors. These sketchy lines are often visible in the completed work (see *April Snow, Salem*). There is no preliminary sketchwork apparent in the watercolor examined, which reveals a dependence on transcription of motifs rather than an original observation from nature.

Although Maurice Prendergast portrayed the same subject matter and composition more than once, it would have been uncharacteristic of him to create a pastiche based on the transferral of specific figures and compositions from a variety of his own works executed over a ten year period.

From the evidence gathered, it seems clear that this is a fake based on three original works by Prendergast. It is interesting to speculate on how it could have come to be since it follows a work that is little known, and to our knowledge has never before been published.

Certain motifs in the forgery, such as the reflection of light on the water and the young girl with her back to the viewer, have been found in at least one other work identified as a forgery by a New York dealer. Perhaps with more information it may be possible to cast more light on the origin of this work. *Virgilia Pancoast*

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Membership rates:

Individual Member \$35. (\$45 overseas)
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Edwin L. Weisl, Jr., *President*
Bonnie Burnham, *Executive Director*
Virgilia Pancoast, *Research Associate*
Mary Ellen Guerra, *Research Associate*
Lucy Klebanow Evans, *Development Officer*

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Caveat to Banks and Businessmen

In recent months, several Northeastern U.S. banks have inquired with IFAR about accepting art as collateral for large loans. These inquiries have been prompted by a number of multi-million dollar projects proposed to banking institutions in which art collections have been offered by the developer as collateral. Separately, a building contractor commissioned IFAR last summer to examine a drawing dubbed to work of a major master of the Italian Renaissance, against which he had already advanced a sizeable loan for completion of a building project. The drawing proved to be of the period, but by a very minor artist.

Businessmen are often astonished to find that title to works of art cannot be checked routinely, and are equally dismayed to learn that appraisals offered as evidence of the value of the works may not be satisfactory proof of authenticity. Before entering into a transaction involving

art, a businessman should best be advised by a reputable expert. But even before hiring an expert, several questions can be asked in order to evaluate the offer that has been made:

Have the works offered as collateral been appraised by a leading gallery or auction house? If not, what are the appraiser's credentials? There is no official institute licensing art appraisers.

Does a certificate of authentication warrant the authenticity of the work? If so, is it clear that the certificate relates to the work that is offered, and has not been tampered with? How does the author of the certificate identify himself? If he is a scholar, has he published on the artist in question? What is the nature of his publication, and is the work of art under consideration mentioned in it?

Is the bibliographical record up to date? If the work is attributed to a major

artist, it should be discussed in recent scholarly works. Absence from recent catalogues implies that the work may have been questioned.

Is the owner willing to disclose the chain of title? Did the work come from reputable sources?

IFAR offers several services that may be useful in evaluating offers to buy or invest in works of art. The services of the IFAR Art Theft Archive are available at no cost, to ascertain whether or not a given work has been reported stolen. Free consultation is available to IFAR members, as to whether documents of authenticity offered with a work seem accurate and acceptable. Finally, IFAR's authentication service offers the opportunity to obtain a detailed examination, when a substantial involvement in a transaction involving art warrants it. These services are detailed below.

Our Program

Authentication

Founded 10 years ago by a group of scholars, the IFAR Authentication Service offers a conduit through which individuals may receive the comments of leading scholars on questions of authenticity. This program is unique in the United States and rare in the world, since IFAR has access to the world's leading experts, and provides a detailed written report on each object it examines.

Our clients include collectors who may wish to verify the pedigree of an object they own, museums that wish to conduct an examination that is not possible on their own premises, estate managers who are uncertain of the value of a collection, and art dealers in the course of their business.

In the ten years of its existence, the authentication service has gradually changed in order to be as flexible as possible to the needs of the community. Today, IFAR will accept most works for examination—including those currently on the market—so long as the owner consents. In some cases, however, we may feel it unnecessary to conduct an examination, in which case we offer the client alternative suggestions to find out what is

necessary. In the last two years, IFAR has also prepared affidavits for presentation in court relevant to the authenticity of works that have been questioned.

Questions of authenticity considered by IFAR may be simple or highly sophisticated. As a part of our task, we try to give our clients an understanding of the reasons for our conclusions, which we hope will help them develop their connoisseurship. We also judge the complexity warranted in each examination, taking into account the value of detailed research to the owner. When a work is judged important by scholars, a detailed examination may be worthwhile; in other cases, a single scholar's opinion is sufficient to resolve the question.

Our fees for authentication range from \$300 for a preliminary examination to \$1000 or more when several scholars are consulted. The IFAR staff will consult with art owners who are considering an examination, at no cost.

Collection Cataloguing

To further enhance the integrity of collections, IFAR offers a collection cataloguing service. Works in a collection will be photographed and inventoried by IFAR

staff, and complete records will be provided to the owner, along with recommendations when we feel that objects in the collection should be further documented or researched.

Art Theft Archive

Established in 1975, the Art Theft Archive contains thousands of records of stolen objects. These records are updated regularly, but only a portion have been published in our monthly Stolen Art Alert or annual Index of Stolen Art. We welcome inquiries concerning the legal status of works of art on the market, and will search our files at no cost to the inquirer. IFAR members may also request special services, such as the issuance of an Art Theft Alert following an important loss, and referrals concerning related matters such as security, litigation, etc.

There is no charge for listing an object in our stolen art listing, and IFAR encourages any art owner who may have experienced a loss to list the missing object with us.

Events

Museum Security Institute

March 16-18 1980, Chicago.
Co-sponsored by the University of Minnesota, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago Historical Society, and Field Museum of Natural History. This is the second annual conference on the subject of security in museums, and is limited to museum administrators.

March 16

Security of Art Objects and the Artist
Harry Jackson
Security Hardware, a Review of the Basics
Robert Ducibella, Joseph Chapman Associates

Recent and Future Developments in Security Hardware

Joseph Chapman
Emergency Planning and Disaster Preparedness
John E. Hunter, National Park Service

Security and the Art Institute of Chicago
Stephen Keller, Art Institute of Chicago

Evening: Terrorism: Crimes against Culture
Irving Younger, Williams & Connolly, Washington, DC

March 17

The Loss of a Greek Head and the Gold Ring of Ramses III: Two New York Experiences

Joseph Volpato, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Art in Transit: Interstate Ground Travel and Interstate Air Travel

Joseph Buchanan, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Museum to Museum and County to Country, The International Exhibition

Donald Fischer, Field Museum of Natural History

Security in Natural History Museums

Donald Fischer, Field Museum of Natural History

March 18

The Pros and Cons of Polygraph Testing
Donald Rykker, University of Minnesota

Security and Fire Protection at the Smaller Museum

Dennis Alsford, Museum of Man, Ottawa

Losses in Small Museums, The FBI Experience

Robert Spiel, FBI, Chicago

Security on the Chicago Historical Society
Director of the Society

Registration: \$300. For further information, contact Donna Ducca, Department of Conferences, University of Minnesota, 219 Nolte Center, 315 Pillsbury Drive, Minneapolis, Mn 55455 or telephone 612/376-2578.

Legal Problems of Museum Administration

March 17-19, 1981 at the University Museum, Philadelphia. Cosponsored by the American Law Institute-American Bar Association and the Smithsonian Institution in cooperation with the American Association of Museums.

March 17

New Congress and New Administration: The Outlook for Museums

Peter Kyros, Washington

When Museums Make Money—The Pitfalls of Profit

Robert Antoine, New York

How Exempt Are Tax-Exempt Museums?

Julie N. Gilbert, Washington

The Deduction for Charitable Contributions—What Should be the Museum's Involvement?

Steven Weil, Moderator

Robert Antoine

Gilbert Edelson, New York

Nicolas Ward

The Federal Scene

Suzanne D. Murphy, Smithsonian

March 18

Museums in Court, 1980

Steven Weil, Hirshhorn Museum

The State Attorney General—The Museum's Friend?

Gordon Marsh, Moderator

Robert S. Englesberg, Deputy Attorney General, Pennsylvania

Daniel Kurtz, Assistant Attorney General, New York

Michael W. Stamp, Boalt Hall School of Law, Berkeley, Ca.

The Museum Trustee in the 1980s

Gordon H. Marsh, New York

The State Scene

Mary Elizabeth King, The University Museum, Philadelphia

De-Accession: A Dilemma

Marie C. Malero, Smithsonian

Copyright Update

Nicholas D. Ward

March 19

Concurrent Sessions

Management of the Museum in Extreme Financial Difficulty

Robert M. Carr, CPA, New York

Gordon H. Marsh

Collection Management Workshop

Marie C. Malero

Federal Taxation Concerns for Museums

Suzanne D. Murphy

Workshop on Agreements for Purchase and Disposition of Works of Art

Nicholas D. Ward

Legal Problems of Loan Arrangements

Carroll J. Cavanagh, National Gallery of Art

Peter G. Powers, Smithsonian

Registration: \$290. For further information, contact Donald M. Maclay, ALI/ABA, 4205 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104 or telephone 215/243-1630.

In Quest of Quality

May 16-17, 1981 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A Two-Day Conference on Collecting. Co-sponsored by the National Antique and Art Dealers Association of America, Inc. and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The conference will plummet the art of collecting as a pleasure, an adventure, and a serious business. It will consist of seven panels, each including a collector, a curator, and an art dealer. The purpose of the conference will be to redirect the emphasis on investment as the focus of collecting.

Robert McNeil of the McNeil-Lehrer Report, Moderator.

May 16

American Painting

John Howat, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Lawrence Fleishman, Kennedy Galleries

Julian Gantz, Jr., Los Angeles, Ca.

American Decorative Arts

Barry B. Tracy, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Harold Sack, Israel Sack Inc.

Eric Martin Wunsch, New York

Oriental Art

Martin Lerner, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Robert H. Ellsworth, New York

Collector to be announced

Twentieth-Century Works of Art

Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Lillian Nassau, New York

Ralph Esmarian, New York

May 17

Medieval and Renaissance Works of Art

William D. Wixom, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Gerald G. Stiebel, Rosenberg & Stiebel

Ronald S. Lauder

European Painting

Charles S. Moffett, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Eugene D. Thaw

Norton Simon, Los Angeles, Ca

Collecting: Present and Future Trends

Douglas Newton, Department of Primitive Art, MMA

Peter Schaeffer, A la Vieille Russie, New York

Christopher Forbes, New York

Registration: \$100.

For reservations, contact Department of Concerts and Lectures, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, New York, NY 10021, or telephone 212/879-5500.